

Chris Hansen Testimony

NBC News

The Committee on Energy and Commerce

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

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Good Morning,

I'm Chris Hansen with Dateline NBC. First off, I would like to thank the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations for inviting me to testify today on this critically important topic. I would also like to thank you for understanding and accepting the limitations in what I can say as a member of a news organization.

A little more than 2 years ago we set out to investigate computer predators, adults who go on-line into chat rooms and try to meet underage boys and girls. Volunteers for the on-line watchdog group Perverted Justice posed as young teens home alone and open to the idea of an encounter. We rented a home in Long Island, New York and outfitted it with hidden cameras. The decoys set up profiles in chat rooms that included pictures of boys and girls that were unmistakably under-age. The decoys waited to be approached by men in the chat rooms. They didn't wait long.

Within minutes sometimes, men were trying to start up inappropriate and often obscene conversations. There was graphic language, pornographic material and a grooming process all geared at setting up a sexual liaison with a minor. The question was: would any of the men actually show up at our hidden camera house to keep their date with a young teen.

In the days before the shoot, I had wondered quietly to myself about the possibility that perhaps no one would show up. Maybe the anecdotal evidence we'd seen on the computer predator problem was overstated. But, as I was stuck in traffic on the Throgs Neck Bridge, headed to the house, I received a call from my producer Lynn Keller. She was frantic. A man was due to show up in 45 minutes and I had to be there. Fortunately I made it there in about a half hour leaving just enough time to prepare to confront the

man before he walked in the door right on schedule. For the next two and a half days we witnessed a parade of potential predators. There were men from all walks of life. Even a New York City firefighter surfaced in our investigation.

Last summer we continued our investigation, this time setting up in a home in Fairfax County Virginia, just miles from where we are now sitting. Again Perverted Justice members worked as decoys and the home was outfitted with hidden cameras. In 3 days 18 men walked into the hidden camera house expecting to meet an underage boy or girl. There was a rabbi, an emergency room doctor, a special education teacher and a man who walked in from the garage naked, carrying his clothes and a 12-pack of beer.

Earlier this year we set up in a home in southern California. This time, however, law enforcement set up a parallel investigation so the men could be arrested after I confronted them. In 3 days 51 men came to the house to meet a boy or girl and were arrested. Again, there was a wide range of characters: A teacher, a lawyer, an actor, even a federal agent assigned to the Department of Homeland Security. And there was something we had not seen before: a number of previously convicted sex offenders. One of them was a 68-year old man who had recently pleaded guilty to having sex with a 15-year old boy. He was on probation as he walked into our home to meet someone who told him on-line he was 13. Another man who showed up had an even darker past. Our investigation revealed that 20 years before he walked into our house, he had molested 3 children in the same family in Oregon. Their mother had met the man through a mentoring program. And the trail didn't end there. It turns out he had yet another conviction in Palm Springs, California after that.

The southern California investigation drew men all the way from Los Angeles to San Diego. We wondered if this was a big city crime or if we'd find computer predators in small town America as well. Our next investigation took us to Darke County, Ohio, population 13-thousand. Would potential predators travel miles of country roads, past corn fields and cow pastures to visit a child home alone? The answer was: yes. Even though word of our investigation leaked out in the small town of Greenville where we were set up, 18 men came to our house after explicit on-line conversations with a decoy from the watchdog group Perverted Justice. All of them were arrested after we confronted them. It was here in Ohio that we saw something new. A growing number of the men who showed up had

actually seen some of our past investigations and came anyway. A 6th grade teacher who came to meet a 13-year old girl admitted to me that not only had he seen our past broadcasts, but he had actually discussed them with his fellow teachers. Another man who showed up at our Ohio house late on a Sunday night was scheduled to go to jail in just 4 days for earlier soliciting a child on-line. Since then he's pleaded guilty to molesting a young female relative in yet another case.

Our most recent investigation took us to Fort Myers, Florida where in 3 days 24 men showed up to meet a boy or a girl and subsequently were arrested. After 5 investigations in 5 different states we thought we had seen it all, but no one was prepared for what we saw in Fort Myers. Late on a sunny Sunday afternoon our hidden cameras were rolling as a 40 year old man parked his SUV in front of our home. He had set up a date for sex with a decoy posing as a 14-year old boy. We watched as he got out and walked around to the rear passenger door. We suspected he maybe grabbing some beer or food as we'd seen some other visitors do. Instead he takes his 5-year old son out of his car seat and leads him by the hand up the driveway towards the back door. There was an audible gasp inside the house. After he walked in I told him who I was and what Dateline was doing. I didn't want to scare his son. Fort Myers Police who had set up their parallel investigation in a nearby home saw that the man had brought his child. A female officer scooped up the boy so he would not have to further witness his father's arrest. Police called the boy's mother who was at work and she picked him up at the police station.

In all, 130 men have surfaced in our 5 investigations. 98 of them have been charged criminally. 7 have pleaded guilty. The rest are awaiting trial. What do these men have in common? The majority of the men don't stand out in a crowd. Most look like the guy next to you in line at the dry cleaners or the grocery store. They don not have "predator" tattooed on their foreheads.

Virtually every day in this country it seems a federal or local law enforcement agency does a sting operation targeting potential predators. Dateline has now done 5 investigations in less than 2 years. You'd think that would be a deterrent. Perhaps for some, but for many other men the desire to meet a teen for sex is too powerful. We've also seen men who think the odds of being caught are remote. In our last investigation, several visitors realized almost immediately what was going on. It was almost as if they were saying "oh, you're that guy, this is that show, this is where you want me to sit?"

What drives these men? Based on our experience and what experts tell us there is no one size fits all characterization. Some are sexual opportunists who think they can take advantage of an inexperienced but curious teen. Some are evil. They're just wired wrong. Some are sick, perhaps victimized as a child. Many share an addiction to on-line chat rooms and pornography sites and eventually a compulsion to meet a young teen for sex.

The anonymity and 24/7 access to the Internet can fuel this compulsion. In our experience potential predators will sometimes talk to someone posing as a child for weeks before suggesting a meeting. There is a grooming process that often starts with casual banter, talk of hobbies sports or a troubled relationship with a parent. The potential predator will many times say he's shared in the child's experience. Often the man will say early on that he is too old for the teen and he could get into serious trouble if they met. Then however, the conversation will turn explicit. He'll suggest different sex acts. A meeting is agreed to and the next thing we see is –him- coming through the door.

Our reporting suggests it is not hard for a potential predator to find a teen to talk to. Regional chat rooms are often where our decoys are approached. The decoy never makes the first move. It's usually only a matter of minutes before he or she is contacted. The decoys pose as regular kids with regular issues. They are open to the idea of a visit and potentially a sexual encounter. In our investigations we have found that social networking sites are also popular trolling grounds for potential predators. My Space, Xanga and Facebook are places where teens often post pictures and personal information that they wrongly believe is only viewed by their friends.

The incredibly good news for parents and children is that experts tell us that there is no magic way for a potential predator to enter your home via the high-speed cable. Your child must provide information for a meeting to take place. That is why a dialogue between parent and child and teacher and student is so critical. It's really the same discussion our parents had with us about strangers at the playground or accepting a ride from someone you don't know. You just have to apply it to the Internet.

I'll be happy to entertain questions.

